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S E R M O N,

PREACHED BEFORE

THE HONOURABLE AND RIGHT REVEREND
SHUTE, LORD BISHOP OF DURHAM,

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE
SIR ARCHIBALD MACDONALD,
LORD CHIEF BARON,

AND THE HONOURABLE
SIR ALEXANDER THOMPSON,
ONE OF THE BARONS OF HIS MAJESTY'S EXCHEQUER,

AT THE ASSIZES,

HOLDEN AT DURHAM, THE TWENTY-THIRD OF JULY,

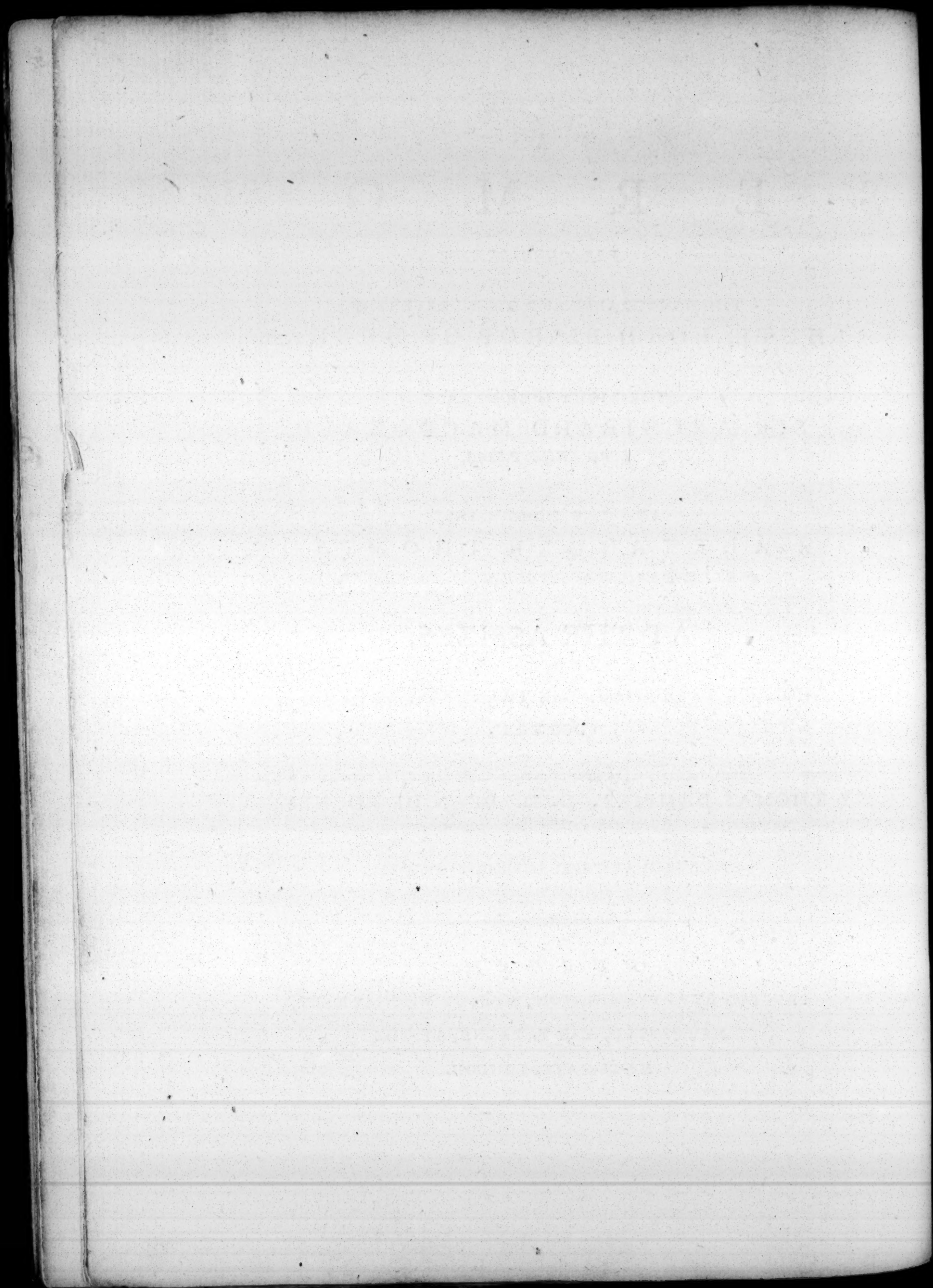
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BY THOMAS DAMPIER, D. D. DEAN OF ROCHESTER.

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DEUTERONOMY iv. 8.

“WHAT NATION IS THERE SO GREAT, THAT HATH STATUTES AND

“JUDGEMENTS SO RIGHTEOUS, AS ALL THIS LAW WHICH

“I SET BEFORE YOU THIS DAY ?”

THAT all the Counsels and Works of God partake of the Perfection of their Author, that they are, therefore, infinitely wise, and in every Particular admirably adapted to their respective Ends, that as far as Man is the Object of them, (and in this World we see nothing that has not some Reference to him) they uniformly tend to his Comfort and Happiness, are certain and indisputable Truths.—Nor can we doubt the contrary Position, that the most enlarged Efforts of human Power and Wisdom, in whatever Way they are exerted, must fall short of that consummate Excellence, which is conspicuous in all

Things that proceed from our great Creator. So great indeed is the Inferiority. that were not our Endeavours assisted and regulated by a Knowledge of his Will and Laws, his Benevolence and Mercies, we should be little successful in our Attempts to provide for the various Exigences of Life.—Upon this Ground is founded that Assertion of Superiority assumed by the Lawgiver of the Jews, in favour of their Polity over that of every other Nation upon Earth ; and the Comparison is the stronger, as it presents on the one Hand, a Government erected by God himself, and on the other, Nations estranged from him, and sunk into the most dissolute Idolatry.

Happy must that Nation be, which, in these Ages of the World, when the immediate Dominion of God over a chosen People is no longer known, and Men are left to themselves to make the best Provision they are able for the common Purposes of Society, can boast any Degree of superior Perfection, and from the Excellence of its Laws and Statutes, aspire deservedly to the Praise of being a wise and understanding People.

It can on no occasion, and particularly on such as the present, be an impertinent Enquiry into the general Circumstances which must

constitute such Happiness. And if we can apply these to ourselves, another more important one will arise, into those, by which its Continuance may be endangered, and the well-regulated Proportions of a fair and beneficial System injured, and perhaps annihilated.

To ensure the Ease and Happiness, to find Security for the various Interests of the Governed, is the just End of every civil Institution. The Means through which these Benefits are to be derived, and through which alone they can be derived, are, Equal Laws, and Equal Liberty. By Equal Laws, must be understood such a Code, as knows no Object so great as not to be amenable to its Influence, nor, on the other Hand, any so abject and contemptible as to be excluded from its Care and Protection. Equal Liberty is that to which such Laws must give Birth, a free Exercise of Action to any Extent, within which the Injunctions laid down by the former are not infringed, or the common Interest, either by the Act itself, or the Consequences of it, brought into Peril. These are Blessings without Price, yet, great as they are, would be incomplete, and limited, if not unsuccessful in their Operations, were they not dependent on a superior Principle, that of Religion. This it is which must ultimately give Life and Energy to human Institutions, and ensure their Permanence and Prosperity.

Such a Connexion between civil Government and Religion cannot be disputed. Through God do Kings reign, and Princes decree Justice; and their Subjects must be obedient, not only for Wrath, but also for Conscience sake. By the former indeed open and flagrant Transgressions may be arrested and chastised, but elsewhere, in a general Prevalence of good and virtuous Principles, must the Remedy be sought against those Evils, which neither the Eye of Justice can discover, or its Arm correct; Evils, which make the greatest Havock in Society, which, unheeded by the World, insinuate themselves into the Privacy of domestic Life, and with Impunity engender Confusion where we are most accustomed to look for Tranquillity. If this be so, the Welfare of that State must be precarious, which does not provide for the Security of Religion by establishing a certain Standard of Faith, by which the Minds of the Community may be regulated, to which all may resort, under which they may safely and peaceably abide, and so live here as to be saved by it hereafter. Without such Precaution, Religion itself, instead of affording Security to the State, would, through the perverse disputings of Men, become the Origin of additional Evils.

But these are general Principles, applicable alike to every Form of

Government. The Question then is, under what Form they will operate most successfully, a Question, not to be determined by theoretic Reasoning, or abstract Speculation, but on the surer Grounds of Fact and Experience. We shall in vain seek for the Benefits, which ought to flow from them, in any System, where the whole Power is so absolutely concentrated in one or a few Persons, as that the Rights of the Many can have no other Dependence than on their Sovereign Will, and no better Security for the Protection which is due to them.

Nor are we likely to find them on the other Hand, where the Power is so confusedly incorporated in the whole Mass, as to expose it to perpetual Distraction for want of a certain Rule to decide, where Dominion ends, and Subjection begins.

We must look for them in that Constitution of Wisdom and Happiness, which has known how to discard the Inconveniences, and adopt only the Benefits attached to these other Modes of Polity; where such a Connexion is established between the Ruler and the Subject, as that without destroying the Distinction between them, both are enabled to co-operate together for the general Good, where

such a Portion of Power and Action is diffused throughout the Whole, as that every Part is enabled to assert and maintain its proper Rights, where both Authority and Liberty, are, with mutual Safety, brought to act in Concert with each other, and so tempered together, as that the one cannot deviate into Outrage, nor the other into Oppression.—This is the Soil, in which equal Laws and equal Liberty will take root, and prosper. Here, assisted by the benign and pervading Influence of Religion, will they plentifully bring forth their salutary Fruits unto Perfection.

That such is the general Outline of the Government under which we live, need not be observed, and it would be easy to complete the Delineation, by exhibiting its Features more at large, by presenting the beautiful Symmetry and Proportion of the various component Parts; their accurate Dependence on each other; the nice Ballance on which they are suspended, so as mutually to assist and controul their respective Operations; the wise Provisions which subsist against the Preponderance of any one Branch, to the Detriment of the others. But such a Discussion is needless. Few there are who are Strangers to its various Excellencies, none who do not feel and partake of them. The prosperous Experience of more than a Century, has proved it to be, as far as any human Work can be, practically perfect.

This Consideration cannot but excite among us, who are the envied Possessors of such a Treasure, an anxious Vigilance for its Preservation; that we be ever on our Guard against the most distant approach of Dangers. Various must these be, as well in Magnitude, as Importance, and ever dependant on the unceasing Fluctuation of Events, to which human Affairs are subject; yet happily they cannot advance so secretly, as not to sound an Alarm before them, and give both Time and Opportunity for Prevention.

Let us then endeavour to trace out, and form, a candid Estimate of the Evils, which appear to deserve our Attention at this present Period, which it has pleased the Providence of God to distinguish by Events, hitherto without Example in the Annals of the World.

We are born in an Age of Theory and Speculation, for so must we characterise that which is now before us. There can be no Question, however, whether the Benefits are equal to the Evils which have accrued from hence to Society. To philosophise, and to reason freely, is the Privilege of every Man, on every Subject; but the greater the Privilege, the more pernicious and detestable the Abuse of it.

We cannot be Advocates of the latter, nor can we fail to make the Distinction, and to apply it. In so doing, we must acknowledge, that a speculative Principle, has enabled this Generation to advance to many important Discoveries, in what may be thought its proper Province, the various Branches of natural Science. Such is the Extent of the Praise due to it, far other Sentiments must we entertain of its Exertions, when preposterously employed in unsettling the sacred Foundations of Religion and civil Government. This is no slight, or trivial Danger, but a Disease, when once intimately admitted, fatal to the very Existence of every Community upon Earth.

Let us briefly consider it.

If Religion be, as it most assuredly is, that powerful Principle, on which all private Virtue is founded, by which every Society must be maintained and upheld, the very Bond and Support of civil Union, every Attempt to invalidate our assurance of its Truth and Evidences, must be looked on with Horror. If once we can be brought to entertain Doubts of the Necessity of any divine Revelation, or the Evidences of those which have been actually vouchsafed; to conceive that Moses and the Prophets, Christ and his Apostles, are no further

to be attended to, than as their Declarations quadrate with human Speculations; if in explaining the Oracles of God, a Mode of Interpretation be admitted, contrary to, and subversive of those sound and established Rules, by which the Meaning and Intention of all other Writings are ascertained; if we can patiently listen to Teachers, whose Opinions tend to the Extinction of all Principles of moral Obligation, and to disarm Conscience of its Terrors, by the impious Supposition, that our immortal Souls perish with the material Body, the End will be, that we shall soon live without God, in this World, and any Expectation of his Judgments in another. We have been, and continue to be, insulted by such Tenets as these, which are obtruded on us, as a rational Theory. Weak Minds may be seduced, and vicious Minds will readily be persuaded by them, but the Consequence is the same, equally fatal to the Individual, and injurious to the Community. When there are Men who pretend to Wisdom, by degrading all serious Things, and are wicked enough to teach others so, and can meet with willing Hearers, the Hour cannot be far distant, when the State must suffer from the Want of Religion in its Members. For the Progress from Licentiousness of Opinion, to Licentiousness in Practice, is neither slow nor dubious. The Sacrifice of

the Truths, must be followed by that of the Duties of Religion.—Wise and good Men, cannot but see, and lament the baneful Effects, which an infidel Philosophy has long since produced among us, inso-much that some, and those not among the least of human Offences, are not only looked on with Indifference, but, to adopt the mournful Observation of a virtuous Roman,* have lost their proper Denominations. What Shame annexes itself to the Profession of a Gamester? what to the adulterous Breach of the most sacred Vow? or to that murderous Honour, as it is called, which dares to revenge a trivial Insult, by bringing into Danger, perhaps extinguishing, the Life of a fellow Creature? If the Circle of these, and such Evils, be extended, so as to comprehend the Mass of the Community, we shall be exposed to every ill Consequence, both private and public, that can follow from the lawless Exertion of all the violent and inordinate Passions of Men, against which, every Barrier will have been removed, and no Means of Controul can any longer be opposed.

It may, however, be thought, that there is not equal Cause for Apprehension, in adventuring upon Speculations, in regard to civil Government. If they are such as tend to undermine the Duties of

* Cato ap Sallustium.

Subjection to those whom God has set over us, or by a philosophic Resort to first Principles, false in Theory, and impossible in Practice, to dissolve the various and necessary Combinations of Society, we know what their End must be; we have seen, and still continue to see them elsewhere, realized, and ripened into Action. They have been proposed to us, but the Honesty and good Sense of this Nation, loudly, and unanimously declared, has rejected the treacherous Offer.

Yet still, as all human Constitutions must be imperfect, it may be urged, that the Safety of our own, cannot be endangered by any theoretic or active Endeavours, to advance it to a supposed greater Degree of Excellence.

If the Project should originate among such as may design nothing less than the general Good, who, in their Machinations, anticipate the Confusion of a Kingdom, and look for the troubling of the Waters, that they may first step in, and make their private Advantage of the common Calamity, the Question is easily answered. They are among the worst, and most dangerous of our Enemies.

If it is undertaken for the ungenerous Purpose of raising its Actors in the Esteem of the People, of forwarding selfish Views of Ambition, on the Pretence of patriotic Exertion, the Consequences will be equally dangerous, and we should be unwise to number any (who should thus dishonestly expose us to them) among our Friends.

But what Answer is to be given to those who assume to themselves, and may deserve the Credit of honest and pure Intentions?

They may be told, that in a System, the general Excellence of which is universally felt and acknowledged, it is at least injudicious to be curiously inquisitive into its latent Imperfections; these, like some Distempers in the Body, are born with less Danger than they are cured; for it exceeds every Effort of human Prudence, to discern, much more to answer for, the Effect which the new-modelling of any the the minutest Wheel, in so complicated a Machine, may produce.

It may be said, that these, and other such Reasons, militate against all Improvements whatever. If, however, we distinguish as we ought to do, between Inconveniences which are experimentally injurious, and those which are inseparable from every human Work, and do not

interfere with the Happiness and Interests of the Community and the Individual, we shall find the same Reason for admitting them in the one Case, as there is for discarding them in the other. They are ill applied in Support of what, if corrected, would produce certain Benefits, but against all visionary Projects, against whatever is not called for by Necessity, and tends more to material Alteration, than wise Amendment, they are conclusive. Above all, it should be remembered, that the Constitution itself, has provided Means for its own Improvement, so as not to leave a Matter thus nice and delicate, to the Fancies of its Children. It often has, and whenever it sees urgent and beneficial Occasions, it continues to exert these Means. Hence have many Blessings, unknown to our Fathers, been derived to us, and unless we ungratefully mistrust this parental Care, we must be well assured, that they will increase on us, and our Posterity.

It were easy to point out other public Evils, which must flow from the same Source, but it is enough to have marked out those, which at this Season, appear to be most imminent. I shall, therefore, conclude, by a short Reply, to what may be objected to the Sentiments advanced in the former part of this Discourse.

Are we then, it may be asked, to surrender the Privilege of speculative and free Enquiry, and to sit down in a torpid Senselessness, under every Circumstance that may occur? Far be it from us, to entertain so degrading an Idea. It is by the Opposition of Reasoning, to Error, that the World has, at all Times, been improved in Wisdom and Happiness. This has given us a political Establishment, which has long been the Envy of surrounding Nations, and a religious one, the Glory and Perfection of reformed Religion. But if we disdain, and it becomes us to disdain, the Restraints which may fetter and contract the honest Exercise of free Enquiry, it is our Duty to guard, with a most suspicious Caution, against the contrary Extreme; that we do not deviate from a Liberty, which is allowed, into a degenerate and unjustifiable Licentiousness. The Laws of God and Man, have drawn a Line between these, so plain and direct, that no one, whose Thoughts and Actions are not under the Influence of Prejudice, or something worse, can mistake it. By attending to this Distinction, and so measuring every Particular of our private and public Conduct, we shall prove ourselves good and virtuous Servants of our heavenly Master, and worthy Members of the Community. We shall persevere unmoveably in our Faith, Strangers to the Uneasiness of Doubts from within, unassailable by any from without. In our Lives, we shall

be pure and virtuous, peaceable and benevolent towards each other, obedient to our Governors, and grateful for the Blessings which we so abundantly enjoy. So, though the Nations around us do furiously rage together, and the Multitudes imagine vain Things, may we hope, honourably to maintain our System of Prosperity, and continue to stand forth in the World, a free, happy, and contented People.

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